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Derry Rail Trail design drops a tunnel - and users' hopes for safety

By Roberta Baker Union Leader Staff
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DAVID LANE/UNION LEADER

Mark Connors, left, Dave Topham and Alex Vogt stand on North High Street in Derry near where the Derry Trail Trail will run in a proposed plan.

DERRY

When Mark Connors, head of the Derry Rail Trail Association, studies the state's latest plan for Derry's favorite walking, biking and hiking path, he sees a map of accidents waiting to happen.

Skidouts, crashes, tumbles and pileups — including people with rolling walkers or wheelchairs — cloud his view of the future, now that the state has scuttled plans for a tunnel under a busy road linking two sides of the railbed trail.

What the state calls a winding, scenic alternative route, which will cross six lanes of traffic on an interstate access road, is no solution, according to trail fans and frequent users. They say it's a 180-degree turn away from safety.

"You might as well put a fire station right here on the curve," Connors said. "One of those spandex warriors (on racing bikes) going, through that button hook? I joke we're going to have to have a fire station here to deal with all the injuries.

"This is a disaster," Connors added. "There's no common sense here. We just want common sense to prevail."

The state's latest design, coined the "spaghetti loop" by detractors, replaces an earlier, straighter version, approved with full funding in 2019, that included a box tunnel to avoid interactions with traffic.

The new plan discards the tunnel. Instead, a push-button signal is supposed to activate a blinking red light that will signal vehicles to stop on an Interstate 93 access road (to be built as part of the Exit 4A construction project) and allow bicyclists and pedestrians to cross the road's six lanes.

The New Hampshire Department of Transportation estimates that the Derry Rail Trail has between 1,000 and 1,500 commuters and recreational users each day.

"We believe the current plan is a sensible balance of all stakeholder interests that provides safe and reasonable access for trail users accessing the trail or crossing Folsom Road, with an improved roadway alignment in a cost-effective manner," Richard Arcand, public information officer for the DOT, said by email Friday.

The tunnel plan, Arcand said, would increase design, construction and long-term maintenance costs, and the new crossing near Shields Brook is ADA compliant.

Last month, the Legislature effectively endorsed the new no-tunnel plan, which the DOT argued would save \$650,000 to \$750,000 on the \$110 million to \$130 million construction project to create Exit 4A off I-93.

Connors says that savings is a pittance, considering the issues at stake.

“They spent more money on engineering (the new plan) than they would spend on the tunnel,” Connors said.



Derry Rail Trail supporters Alex Vogt, left, and Mark Connors stand in a culvert under Madden Road near where they want a tunnel for the trail to pass under a planned six-lane access road to a new Interstate 93 Exit 4A.

DAVID LANE/UNION LEADER

Outcry at wrong turn

Outrage and disbelief from trail users has piled up on social media. According to DOT, the public

will have no more opportunities for public input, after citizens voiced concerns at information sessions earlier in the process.

The new design has yet to receive federal approval or funding.

A blinking-light crosswalk on an interstate access road isn't the only concern. If the new plan, developed in 2020, passes muster with federal transportation authorities as early as sometime in June, trail users also will navigate a 1,000-foot section with a hairpin turn, blind curves and inclines steeper than the state recommends for rail trails.

The question remains: Will the final design be safe?

With swelling numbers and wider use, the Derry rail trail "doesn't accommodate the people who are using it now," said Alex Vogt, a retired engineer for the NHDOT.

"When they dropped the tunnel plan, they didn't hold a public hearing," said David Topham, president of the NH Rail Trail Coalition, which has worked to create 52 rail trails across the state and converted roughly 320 miles of formerly active railroad beds to recreational use.

"The DOT and three people met behind closed doors," Topham said. "How could they approve this?"

Topham said he has tried unsuccessfully to meet with the DOT.





A group of new mothers who organized on a Facebook group walk south toward Salem on the Derry Rail Trail on Thursday.

DAVID LANE/UNION LEADER

No love for the 'loop'

Susan Nichols, who lives on North High Street adjacent to the Derry Rail Trail, worries about safety. Nichols and her 12-year-old son use the trail to walk, bike and go downtown because it's faster than driving and trying to find a parking space.

The current trail has two blinking lights to enable users to cross two lanes of traffic on West Broadway in downtown Derry, and it can be a challenge getting vehicles to halt for that.

"Even with two new lights, they're not stopping. You have to stand there to make sure they do," Nichols said. "Now they're going to have one for six lanes? If you don't have a tunnel at some point, you have to cross all that traffic to get to the other side."

Liz Greenberg, 71, and her wife Deborah Roof, 68, ride recumbent bicycles for recreation and exercise. The trail's proposed 5% grade, instead of the customary 1% to 2%, barely falls within Americans with Disabilities Act limits for rail trails. For Roof and Greenberg, riding will be risky when heading into a steep turn where oncoming regular-height bike riders can't see recumbent bikers at ground level.

The rail trail should be designed for 20 mph speeds, Connors said. That means no steep curves or significant downhill stretches. "It won't accommodate anticipated users and the anticipated speeds that they'll ride on a rail trail," he said. "Kids in wheelchairs can't navigate this."

And a section of the "spaghetti loop" lies within a flood plain, which floods in heavy rain, he said.

"The attitude of DOT is this is a nice, walkable, meandering path. That's not really what it's supposed to be," Connors said.

“Once they build this, it’s not going to be just for tomorrow or the next day. Once in place, it will be there for decades. It’s shortsighted to save money at the expense of safety,” Greenberg said.

“Build it now so everyone in the future can be safe.”

With this design, “You’re saying to disabled people, ‘Sorry, you can’t go north,’” said Roof, whose degenerative back condition prevents her from riding an upright bike, walking the trail or standing for long periods anywhere.

“This spaghetti loop,” she said. “I don’t know how I would manage that. It’s not a solution for me.”

A possible bestseller

Derry’s roughly 4-mile rail trail is one section of the yet-to-be completed Granite Rail Trail, a 120-mile diagonal linking Salem to Lebanon and connecting to trails in Vermont and Massachusetts. Based on estimates of the money spent along the way by regular and visiting users, rail trails are expected to contribute about \$18.7 million in annual revenue to the state. Of that, \$7.5 million is expected to come from the Windham, Derry and Londonderry section, according to the DOT’s 2022 Rail Trails Plan.

“People look for destination trails,” Connors said. “There’s money to be made if they do this right.”





A young bike rider takes a spin on the paved section of the Derry Trail Trail which runs over a dam on Hoods Pond in Derry on May 18. There is disagreement on how to connect the trail with the Londonderry Rail Trail to the north.

DAVID LANE/UNION LEADER

The state's longest rail trail is 58 miles. Box tunnels are standard on rail trails across New Hampshire, including in Salem, Windham and Concord, said the Rail Trail Coalition's Topham.

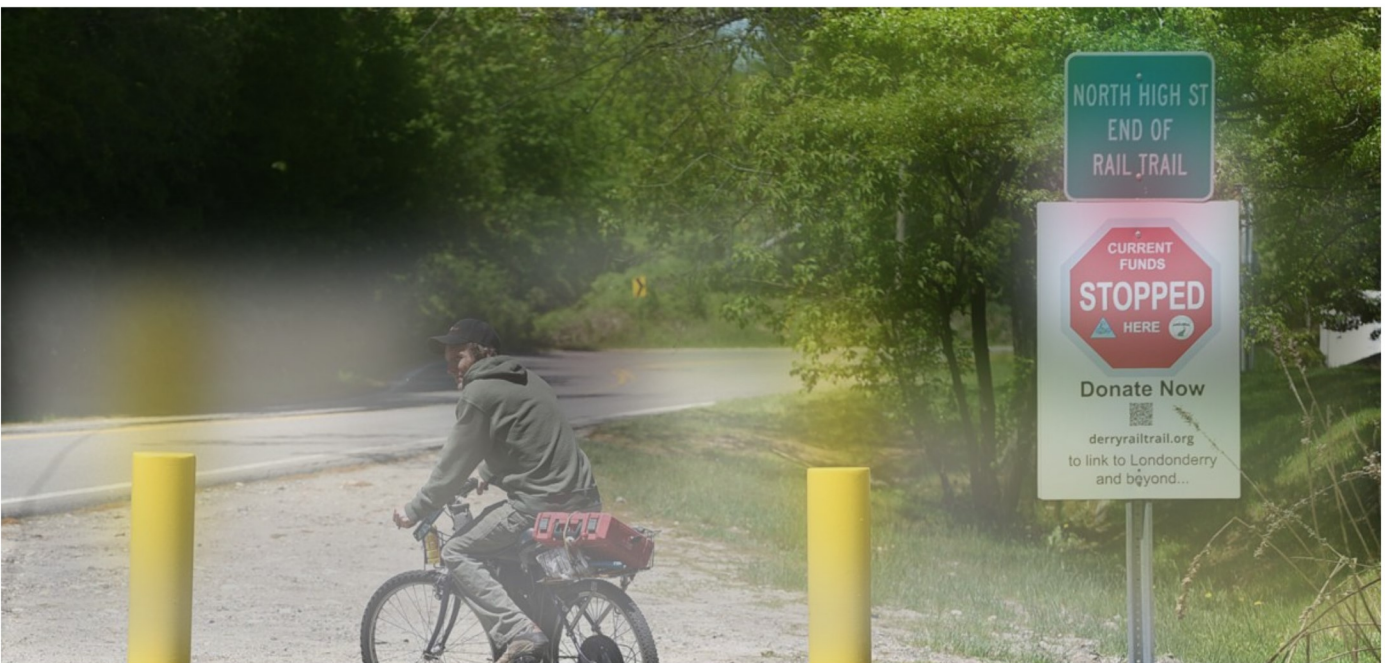
Requiring trail riders and walkers to push a button to stop cars, buses and trucks on a busy interstate access road is a recipe for traffic congestion and collisions, and will cause more expense and trouble than a tunnel-free design is worth, rail trail supporters maintain.

The speed limit is expected to be posted at 40 mph, Topham said, but drivers coming off I-93 often frequently roll along at the highway speed of 65 mph.

"It's another danger point," said recumbent-bike rider Greenberg.

Bicyclists and people with disabilities prefer a straighter, safer route, she said – and they may seek to cross at the four-way intersection at Folsom Road and North High Street instead.

To discourage people from going that way, the DOT plans to lay down gravel before and after that existing crosswalk – a deterrent to bike and scooter riders, people in motorized wheelchairs and older residents with canes and walkers.





A bicyclist turns onto North High Street at the current end of the Derry Rail Trail. There is disagreement on how to connect the trail with the Londonderry Rail Trail to the north.

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No trail for toddlers

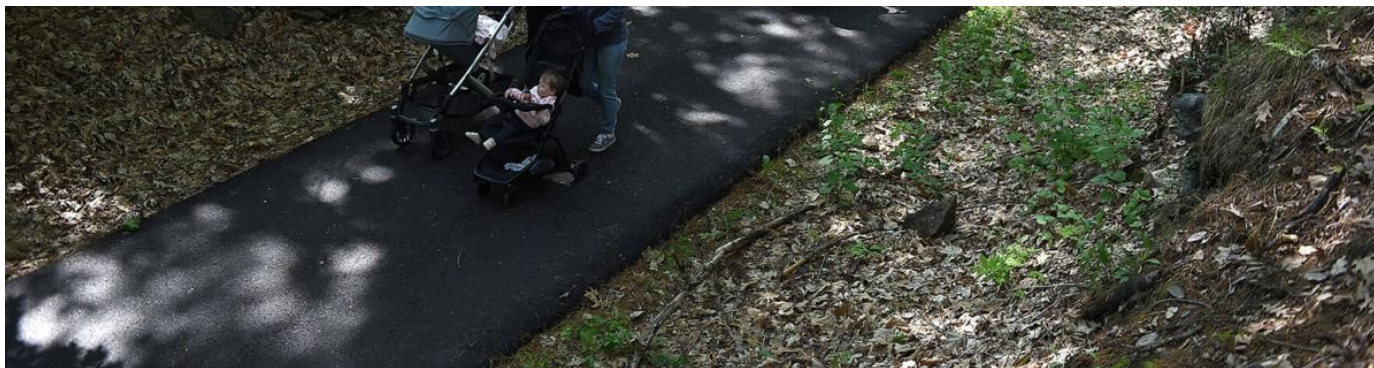
In April, Mary Mears of Derry started a Facebook page, Stroller Struts, which attracted mothers from Derry, Londonderry, Salem and Manchester who wanted to push their little ones in strollers on a two-mile walk twice a month. One time, 20 moms showed up, some with walking toddlers as well as infants in strollers.

"We're going to have to worry about walking safely and having enough room on the trail," said Mears, who walks while her 10-month-old rides in a stroller. "I can't imagine keeping your baby safe and a toddler, too."

If the new path seems precarious, moms will drop out, she said.

"I don't want to risk crossing all that traffic and looping around turns and having it be longer than with a simple tunnel," Mears said. "For me, it's my mental health."





A group of new mothers who organized on a Facebook group walk north approaching downtown Derry on the Derry Rail Trail on Thursday.

DAVID LANE/UNION LEADER

The state says that if Derry still wants the tunnel, the town can pay the cost — even though federal funding covered that expense in 2019, before NHDOT revised the design.

Derry and Londonderry each kicked in \$5 million in 2015 for the three-year study that produced the original tunnel plan. Now private fundraising is striving to keep that design alive.

Regarding the new route and the “spaghetti loop,” “Our last hope is the feds will knock it out,” Connors said. “Ultimately we’d like the feds to say ‘Put back the tunnel.’ It’s less than 1% (of the Exit 4A construction cost) to save lives and children. It’s a state-long rail trail that will last 100 years. There’s no point in not doing the correct thing first.”

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